

**STATEMENT OF  
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FOREST SERVICE  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
JOINT OVERSIGHT HEARING**

**Concerning**

**FIRE MANAGEMENT ON FEDERAL LANDS**

**Before the**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH  
and  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS,  
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**JUNE 7, 2000**

**Madam Chairman, Mister Chairman, and Members of both  
Subcommittees:**

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss fire management on federal lands. I am Michael Rains, Area Director for the Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry, and recently led the effort on policy implications of large fire management in the Forest Service. I am here today with Jose Cruz, Director for Aviation and Fire Management for the Forest Service, and Lyle Laverty, Regional Forester for the Rocky Mountain Region of the Forest Service. Regional Forester Laverty led the effort to develop the Forest Service's strategy for dealing with hazardous fuels in the western United States. Also with me today is Denny Truesdale, Assistant Director of the Fire and Aviation Management Staff.

I would like to briefly cover the following topic in my testimony:

- The current fire situation
- Using partnerships and new tools in the wildland/urban interface
- Addressing current forest conditions

### **The Fire Situation**

As you know, unfortunately, we are already experiencing a number of wildland fires across the nation. The tragedy of the Cerro Grande Fire near Los Alamos, New Mexico has filled the recent headlines. Florida and Arizona are also experiencing large fires this year, and it is just the beginning of the fire season. As of May 31, 2000, the Forest Service with our State and Federal partners has fought 70 large fires across the southwest.

The wildland fire situation remains critical in New Mexico, Arizona, and parts of the southern United States. We expect dry conditions to persist for another month in the southwest until the onset of the summer monsoon rains and longer in other parts of the country.

### **Using Partnerships and New Tools in the Wildland Urban Interface**

The threat of wildland fires to our communities and businesses is real and continues to grow, especially in the west where more and more people are building homes and businesses in fire-sensitive ecosystems. Intermixing homes and forests can create dangerous situations and result in evacuations and great damage and loss of property. Destructive wildland fires occur naturally in California and other areas of the country, from Spokane, Washington, to Boulder, Colorado, to Florida.

Protecting the public and firefighter safety is the top priority for Federal firefighting agencies. Since 1985 in response to the growing risk, we have been working with the National Association of State Foresters, the National Fire Protection Association, and local firefighting organizations to educate homeowners in fire-sensitive ecosystems about the consequences of wildfires and techniques in community planning, homebuilding, and landscaping so that they can protect themselves and their property. Working with Federal, State, and private partners, the Forest Service has reached out

to hundreds of communities adjacent to the national forests, including communities in Utah, Arizona, California, New Mexico, Colorado, Idaho, and other States across the country.

Through this partnership, the Federal agencies along with the National Fire Protection Association developed the concepts and practices of FIREWISE landscaping. Using appropriated funds, the federal partners offer education, information, and sometimes even fire resistant vegetation to help communities in the wildland urban interface be prepared for the inevitable fire outbreaks that occur in these ecosystems. We are also working with the Insurance Standards Office, the body that sets standards and premiums for property and homeowners insurance, on the significant protection offered by FIREWISE concepts. We believe that these techniques will reduce insurance premiums and protect lives and property, as well. The Federal agencies are also leading workshops across the nation for developers, bankers, and insurance agents to assure that future developments in fire-sensitive ecosystems will be planned and constructed to better withstand the inevitable outbreaks of wildfire.

Also as part of the State Fire Assistance the Wildland/Urban Interface Cooperative Fire Protection Program funds competitive grants to State and local entities to implement community fire risk reduction activities. This program supports coordination with States and localities to reduce long-term wildfire costs through prevention by hazardous fuels reductions and fire planning for wildland/urban interface. The States have agreed to spend \$10 million as matching funds for the \$10 million included in the President's fiscal year 2001 budget to implement special projects to improve protection of high risk wildland/urban interface areas. House action on the fiscal year 2001 Interior and Related Agencies appropriations bill has reduced this amount to less than \$5 million available for vegetation modification and FIREWISE homeowner programs.

In addition to the FIREWISE effort and the Wildland/Urban Interface Cooperative Fire Protection Program, the Federal government supports State fire management programs through assistance to volunteer fire departments.

### **Addressing Current Forest Conditions**

As we have previously testified, the buildup of hazardous fuels in the national forests poses a significant threat to public safety and ecosystem health. We have been working on several fronts to address current forest

conditions. We are increasing our emphasis on treatment of hazardous fuels, and developing a strategy to reduce the hazardous fuels build-ups on national forest lands.

Decades of effective fire suppression, selective timber harvesting, and grazing, have put many forests at higher risk from damaging wildfires. Large numbers of small diameter trees have grown into forest stands during the last century of aggressive fire suppression. These fuels have grown under larger remnant trees and created ladder fuels that allow fires to climb into the overstory and race through the tree crowns, defying our control efforts.

The Federal agencies with wildland firefighting responsibilities are aware of the growing risk, and the Forest Service has been steadily increasing its program to treat hazardous fuels through the last decade to reduce fire risks. The Forest service uses a variety of tools and techniques to treat hazardous fuels, including mechanical treatment and removal, prescribed burning, or a combination of the two.

Since 1994 when the Forest Service treated approximately 385,000 acres across the United States, we have increased annual treatment almost four-fold. Last year we treated approximately 1.4 million acres. In the southwest, we have increased annual treatment three-and-a-half times, from about 37,630 acres of hazardous fuels treatment in 1994 to over 122,480 acres last year.

High-risk areas, such as wildland/urban interface areas are the focus of much of our immediate priority work. There are many opportunities to treat these high priority areas that are dominated by non-commercial material, where commercial timber contracts are infeasible. For example, at the request of the New Mexico delegation, we recently provided information outlining strategies and tools for reducing fire risks by treating small-diameter trees and non-merchantable hazardous fuels.

To protect communities from fire, it is necessary to accomplish work on private as well as public lands. The Administration has testified in support of S. 1288, the Community Forest Restoration Act, which if enacted into law would authorize cost-share grants to stakeholders for collaborative forest restoration projects, and would help deal with treating these high-risk areas in New Mexico.

In the past year, we have been working on three strategies to improve our fire management programs and have issued reports addressing large fire costs, workforce capacity and configuration, and a strategy to reduce vegetation-related fire risks across our nation. Teams are in place to begin implementing the recommendations of all three of these reports, but I would like to concentrate on the hazardous fuels strategy report.

Our effort was spurred by an April 1999, General Accounting Office (GAO) report titled: *Western National Forests: a Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats* (GAO/RCED-99-65). The GAO asserted, "The most extensive and serious problem related to the health of national forests in the interior West is the over-accumulation of vegetation". Regional Forester Laverty led the team that is developing the draft report "*A Cohesive Strategy for Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire-Adapted Ecosystems*." The report is currently under review within USDA.

The team is developing a strategy to drastically cut the hazardous fuels problem and reduce the risks to public safety and ecosystem health. They based their recommendations on the premise that healthy, resilient ecosystems will produce sustainable resources and emphasize the significance of fire to the health of fire-adapted ecosystems, fire-maintained forests and grasslands. The objective of the strategy is to:

- Improve the resilience and sustainability of forests and grasslands at risk,
- Conserve species and biodiversity,
- Reduce wildfire costs, losses, and damages, and
- Better ensure public and firefighter safety.

Direct treatment costs include planning, mechanical thinning, prescribed burning, supporting research, invasive species mitigation, monitoring, and evaluation. In the West, we will emphasize treatment of high-risk areas that used to be areas of historically low fire risk.

While emphasizing *restoration* in the interior West, the strategy also supports ongoing efforts to *maintain* healthy ecosystems where they currently exist, particularly in the South, where, without treatment, fuels rapidly accumulate to dangerous levels. The strategy acknowledges the importance of maintenance treatments in the southern and eastern United

States. The current fire activity in the Florida serves as a reminder of the importance of treatments in this volatile area.

The strategy requires a strategic approach, so that we will not need to treat every acre of land in a high-risk category. By focusing treatments on high priority areas that have high fuel concentrations in forest types where fire is a natural element that has been excluded for a significant period, and by considering landscape dynamics and other project design and layout factors, we can achieve the overall objectives without treating every acre.

Although much of the Forest Service timber sales program has previously not been targeted in a way to address fire risk reduction, Forest Service policy is to begin to target funds to reduce fire risk. Similarly, the fiscal year 2001 House Committee appropriations report language (the Forest Products budget line) encourages the agency to alter its allocation of timber sales and vegetation management funds to include a mechanism to provide substantially more resources to those areas of the Nation at risk to insect, disease or wildfire loss. The Forest Service is reviewing its existing budget allocation mechanisms to consider the most appropriate way to enhance forest health and reduce fire risks.

We are already using the priorities and principles articulated in the strategy, such as using the fire risk mapping tools available to us for identification and prioritization of high-risk areas. Performance measures in the Forest Service strategic plan have been changed to account for this priority work.

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss how the Forest Service's roadless proposal would affect the agency's ability to fight fires or reduce hazardous fuels. The proposal would not affect fire suppression activities, as our fire suppression organization is staffed and equipped to fight fires in all types of areas and conditions, including in wilderness and roadless areas. While some roadless areas are in the moderate to high-risk categories, the vast majority of our hazardous fuels in need of treatment occur in areas that are well-roaded, and would generally be of much higher priority for treatment than most of the inventoried roadless areas.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the threat of wildland fires to our communities and businesses is real and continues to grow as we build homes and businesses in fire-adapted ecosystems. Fires occurring within the wildland/urban interface are

inevitable, and when fires break out, our first priority is protecting the public and our firefighters' safety. Although the property losses associated with catastrophic fires such as the recent Cerro Grande fire are staggering, we were successful in protecting the lives of both the public and firefighters. This is a tribute to the excellent training of our firefighting workforce and our attention to safety.

The Forest Service is committed to avoiding future tragedies like those in Los Alamos and to implementing a cohesive strategy to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems on national forest lands. That means reducing hazardous fuels that have built up over the better part of a century as a result of fire suppression and past land management practices, while ensuring cautious and consistent protocols in any uses of controlled fires.

We will continue to work with our Federal, State, and local firefighting cooperators, and with the Congress to assure that the Federal firefighting agencies have the resources we need to educate home and landowners to the inevitable action of fire in the ecosystem, protect the public, property, and resources when fires occur.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the members of your subcommittees might have.